Inspecting the Canons

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Divergent stories in popular fiction.

A contemporary sequel release in the cinema, an ongoing series of books, a TV series, comic books, webseries, computer games or all of these combined. Each output and release of work featuring a familiar cast of characters appeals to its consumers through that familiarity and a desire to learn about the next adventure of a particular hero or heroine.

This is particularly true in genre fiction, where we have seen an unprecedented rise in investment and release of ongoing storylines across the different consumer mediums.

The consistency of these outputs in their frequency of publication depends on their commercial viability, but the consistency of character, location and story across a multiplicity of content requires careful cataloguing and reference, particularly if more than one content creator is involved in the construction of the work(s).

My research on this co-ordination identifies the need to construct an unpublished *macrotext* that sits behind published material to adapt and change as each is developed, ensuring consistency between the published works. This allows for a synergy of intention and detail during an intense publication period, or ongoing consistency as a collection of texts looks to encourage its audience to follow an ongoing story across multiple outputs.

Jean Baudrillard's ascribes Science Fiction into his second order of simulacra:

> …simulacra that are productive, productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production—a Promethean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of an indefinite liberation of energy (desire belongs to the utopias related to this order of simulacra);

(Baudrillard, 2016: 121)

Baudrillard's notion of hyperreal constructs certainly applies to the concept of canon and the macrotext. The idea of 'continuous globalisation and expansion' resonates with the simulationist qualities of fiction reference material. The strategic aims of roleplaying games, such as White Wolf's *World of Darkness* (1991) or *Rolemaster 2nd Edition* (1984) by Iron Crown Enterprises certainly step beyond the idea of providing enough information to allow a gamemaster to tell a story, and into the realms of redundancy in their detail. Of course, we cannot know what will ever be truly redundant, but this exhaustive depiction can exceed our own definitions of reality, particularly if we think of the world in simplistic terms, thereby rivalling our own self-defined hyperreal construction of what does and doesn't exist. The similarity of intention between these constructions lies in their attempt to provide homo-stasis. Consistency within the frameworks encourages reliance on information and new information is analysed from a framework perspective, thereby allowing it to reinforce what has already been established.

Baudrillard's third order of simulacra is also relevant:

> …simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game—total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.
>
> (Baudrillard, 2016: 121)

The concept of totality as mentioned here, confirms the concept of redundancy, which are also mentioned by Christine Brooke-Rose when analysing Tolkien.

> Apart from the 'hypertrophic' redundancy in the in the text itself, the recapitulations and repetitions, there are long appendices, not only on the history and genealogy but on the language of elves, dwarves, wizards and other powers, together with their philological development, appendices which though ostensibly given to create belief in the 'reality' of these societies, in fact and even frankly playfully reflect the author's private professional interest in this particular slice of knowledge, rather than narrative necessity, since all of the examples of runic and other messages inside the narrative are both given in the original and translated. Nor are the histories and genealogies in the least necessary to the narrative, but they have given infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies, whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish.

(Brooke-Rose, 1983: 247)

This writing, identified as redundant in this analysis, finds purpose through the variety of explorations made by subsequent creative contributors. Those who devised films, games and other associated fiction from Tolkien's writing, did so by making use of the redundant work. This is certainly true of the two film trilogies, the roleplaying games, the board games, the computer games and the tabletop wargames that have been subsequently devised.

That said, there are many fictions where such consistency is only partially observed and/or ignored at times. These projects are messy stories where contradiction lives and rides rampant over the plot lines, picking and choosing the connected elements previous stories as they wish. Often, the visual image is prioritised in this, as it is clearly identifiable. This becomes the predominant identifier of interest for the consumer and the characters they identify with.

Gary K. Wolfe identifies concept this as an icon.

> Like a stereotype or convention, an icon is something we are willing to accept because of our familiarity with the genre, but unlike ordinary conventions, an icon often retains its power even when isolated from the context of conventional narrative structures.
>
> (Wolfe, 1979: 16).

In a modern context, comic books offer the most obvious example of an ongoing story of continuing contradiction. The consummation of content in a medium that publishes once a week is a difficult beast to manage. Unlike a television series, many do not have break periods in which the majority of production is completed, and the medium exists near the margin of commercial viability. An 'iconic' character is a commodity, their continual adventures a reliable revenue stream that must meet the ongoing deadlines of publication, so as not to disturb the habitual buying practises of an audience. Additionally, stories that span multiple issues are not necessarily connected to the next set of

stories, beyond the presence of the 'icon' character(s). This sometimes reflects a global marketplace, where the exported stories may not appear on store shelves in the same order, or the consumer may be more casual in their interest. In many ways, the comic book shares its priority of consistency with soap opera. Scratch a little way beneath the surface and questions arise that the narrative cannot cope with, but the urgency of the plot is designed to stop us looking left or right and considering issues in relation to the actual age of a character such as Spider-Man, who was a fifteen-year-old teenager in 1962 (Comic Back Issues, 2011).

It is interesting to note the acceptance of 'retconning' (retroactive continuity) in comic books, where consistency remains fluid and secondary to character. However, this does not preclude plots being built over a longer term and coming to fruition years after they were first conceived, such as Jessica Drew as a Skrull agent, conceived in 2006 and revealed in 2010 (Bendis, 2010). However, these consistencies of vision usually revolve around the continued presence of one writer.

Additionally, the relationship a popular franchise has with a second expression of its story communicated in another medium is often complex. Storylines in Marvel comics have been used to construct the storylines of the Marvel film franchise. *Captain America: Civil War (2016)* written by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely is clearly inspired by *Avengers: Civil War (2007)* written by Mark Millar, but there is no clear relationship between the two, other than the cast of characters (Wolfe: 1979). The plot of *Spider-Man* (2002) draws from several classic episodes of the comic book, taking for example, Steve Ditko's depiction of Peter Parker at school (Ditko, 1962) and the later introduction of Mary Jane Watson (Ditko, 1966) and bringing them together as classmates.

Readers of the comic books accept that the films operate on a separate continuity, drawing their inspiration from the original depictions, but even then, the cinematic continuity is altered or reset as new actors take the place of old ones in the titular (iconic) roles.

By comparison, the Harry Potter Films (2001-2011) have a stronger relationship with the books they were adapted from (Rowling: 1997-2007) with minor changes made, other than to compress the stories into the requisite movie running time, although readers have been very analytical in listing all the detailed alterations and omissions (Fulcher, 2015). In general, the books are seen as a deeper exploration of Rowling's vision, allowing a reader to learn more about the reasons and ideas behind each aspect of the story they may have first experienced in the films.

Similarly, the Lord of the Rings franchise offers two pathways into the world of Middle-Earth and Frodo's quest to destroy the one ring (Tolkien, 1993). Whilst the books and films were produced fifty years apart, a large portion of their contemporary audience will have come to Tolkien's writing through Jackson's cinematic vision. This in itself creates a visual relationship between the two as the Orcs, Elves and Trolls described in the writing are realised on screen and remain in the mind of the viewer as they read. This is the megatext (Brooke-Rose, 1983) and appeal to memory from the referential code (Barthes, 1991).

This inverted experience also demonstrates the imperfect realisation of an author's intention. The reader's interpretation of a text cannot be precisely the same as the writer's and nor does it need to be. The encoding and decoding establishes a connection and the room a writer afford to the reader's imagination as partner to their own vision. This invokes Barthes, *Death of the Author* (Barthes, 1967), where a text or texts can be interpreted on its own merits. In this case, the interpretation of a

text has informed its adaptation beyond the intention of the writer. In the case of Rowling's work, there is still a guiding presence, but in the case of Tolkien's there is not.

Both of these examples highlight the revision of a canon that falls short of the retconning mentioned above, but they redefine the image a reader may have of the work, invoking the aforementioned megatext (Brooke-Rose, 1982). There is something lost here, as the visual representation is easier and can supersede the previous imaginings of the reader. So, Harry Potter is now a teenage Daniel Radcliffe (Yates, 2009) and Elves look like Orlando Bloom in a blond wig (Jackson, 2001).

Revisionist interpretations of texts and revisions of those texts in new forms are not only an issue of modern times and genre. *Lost Scriptures* (2003) by Bart D. Ehrman collects together some of the rejected writing of the New Testament.

> The debates over which texts were apostolic, and therefore authoritative lasted many years, decades, even centuries. Eventually—by about the end of the third Christian century—the views of one group emerged as victorious. This group was itself internally diverse, but it agreed on major issues of the faith, including the existence of one God, the creator of all, who was the Father and the Holy Spirit together made up the divine godhead.

(Ehrman, 2003: 4)

Again, the image of characters has been revised, this time through omission. Wolfe's concept of the icon applies in the same way, only not in isolation, but in the revision and re-encoding of the text. Each reader of the Bible takes a different interpretation from each different version and each experience of fresh connected content builds on that interpretation in a similar layering of connected texts.

The concretised image of characters across texts applies to many other historical fiction continuities. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain) published sometime between 1136 and 1138 established the character of Arthur from a series of proto legends, which was then reinterpreted by Thomas Malory in *Le Morte d'Arthur* first published in 1485. Subsequent stories, *Once and Future King* (1958), and modern interpretations by Stephen Lawhead, David Gemmell and many others demonstrate the timeless nature of the story, characters and themes. Some writers rely and build on the previous imaginings, some choose to contradict them.

Another parallel can be drawn to modern fan fiction. The continual exploration of alternative narratives might be considered unofficial by those who own the intellectual property of the characters, mythos and milieu, but they are still explorations of each in the eyes of the reader. Any individual who connects them with their other experiences of the same characters is building their own narrative consistency beyond any individually encoded intention of one author. In many ways, the aberration of this process lies in the attempted protection of intellectual property.

The Ring of Soshern (c.1973) is one of the earliest Star Trek fan fiction stories and explores a homosexual relationship between Kirk and Spock, a direction Rodenberry, Paramount Pictures and CBS would have been unlikely to accept in any medium at the time. By comparison, the current controversy between Paramount Pictures and fan film creators of *Prelude to Axanar* (2014) and the forthcoming Axanar film is much more public affair, but still confronts the same tension over the

audience's desire for content and the originator's desire to retain value and ownership of their creative ideas.

All of these examples lead back to Barthes' code and Baudrillard's map. Both concepts rely on one immediate quality, the imaginative and experiential engagement of the reader. With the plethora of published material across the genres of fantasy, horror and science fiction, determining what is or isn't 'canon' or 'official' in terms of the story or development of the characters ultimately becomes the decision of the reader and so, despite the best intentions of co-ordinated publications establishing consistency across the breadth of a transmedia project, if a reader elects to include a fan fiction story as the continuance of a character's journey, then both the code and the map are different to the code or map intended by those who may have originated them. This truly is the *Death of the Author* (Barthes, 1967) in as much as the connected texts to those produced by the original writer, or those considered official and privy to the macrotext are saturated by enthusiastic creative contributions from fans. The reader is able to define their own map and develop their own megatext of referential experiences.

This new plethora of fan texts are in the same tradition as the aforementioned reinvention of Arthurian legends. With continual improvements to our internet access, these texts are available to us with less and less effort required. And, with the tools available to us to create new work becoming more and more usable and affordable, the barrier between consumer and contributor becomes increasingly artificial, relying on two subjective strands, that of commercial value and that of quality that are supposed to be inherent in official, canonical texts.

The intrinsic value of content is difficult to determine in this sea of creativity. What sets apart one story from another? In populist multi-authored projects with a large number of works written, value is often determined only by the concept of intellectual property. In this, when a fan has no ability to generate monetary value in their work, their motivation for making new stories lies in the same place as their desire to read new stories about their favourite icons (Wolfe, 1979).

The concept of quality is also an evolving threshold that becomes increasingly blurred (Pirsig, 1991) and the subject of a multitude of studies in itself. The refined methodologies of different publishing and production processes look to ensure certain standards, but ultimately these are not requisites for the encoding of a message within a text and the decoding of a message from the text. The stylistic trappings of quality are more often a set of signifiers that determine the concept of officialness and canonical approval mentioned above.

Ultimately, the determination of what or what is not a relevant experience to a reader's understanding of a character's continual journey is determined by that reader, despite all the best intentions of any author, publisher or copyright holder. It has always been so and will always continue to be so, no matter what gateways we might contrive do place in the way of this relationship.

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